

The Girl Who Was Misplaced

The Sorting Hat made a mistake. Hermione Granger, the incredibly intelligent lead female in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, should not have been placed in Gryffindor House; she should have been given a seat at the Slytherin table her first year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Ambition, signature of those placed under the emerald and silver banner, is not a bad trait to carry; on the contrary, it is quite important. However, Slytherins are known to take their ambition a little too far, especially when a situation involves personal gain. Hermione often comes across as a stickler for the rules, but she is also notably ambitious. She seems like a girl with a strong sense of morality, but there are moments when her motives are self-serving.

Hermione is not nearly as cruel as the Slytherins readers are familiar with, but she is undoubtedly feisty. In two of the Sorting Hat's songs, we learn that Salazar Slytherin "Loved those of great ambition" (*Goblet* 177) and students chosen to be in his House are "cunning folk [who] use any means to achieve their ends" (*Sorcerer* 118); Hermione is certainly a character who does just that. She boils with such an overabundance of compassion, for house elves in particular, that she becomes overeager in her attempts to make others join her. She begins her organization, "the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare," in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and wastes no time in recruiting members (224). Her attempt to help these lesser creatures would be admirable if she were not so forceful. In fact, she does not even *ask* her two friends to join, but rather *tells* them their positions—Ron is treasurer and Harry the secretary (225). Hermione has the right intention, but seems to drift into a more self-serving direction. No one is as eager to stick up for house elves as she, and because no one else is serious about the matter, Hermione goes another step further and

hides knitted hats around the Gryffindor common room for unsuspecting house elves to grab while cleaning. Ron accuses her of “trying to trick them . . . when they might not want to be free.” However, Hermione refuses to believe that house elves are happy with their position in the world, exclaiming, “Of course they want to be free!” She holds her ground, but blushes at being confronted yet again about her overzealous passion (*Order* 255). Hermione is unable to grasp, even after being told by more than one source, that the majority of house elves are quite happy to serve under witches and wizards and her eagerness to free them is actually taken as an insult. It seems likely, then, that her motives are less about the feelings of the house elves themselves than her own discomfort at the thought of uncompensated work. Moreover, Hermione is not one who likes to be outdone or disproved. Readers can see this aspect of her character all throughout *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*; she is quite annoyed when Harry’s used Potions book proves to provide better instructions, and therefore better results, than she can attain by simply following the text: “Hermione, meanwhile, was resolutely plowing on with what she called the ‘official’ instructions, but becoming increasingly bad-tempered as they yielded poorer results than the Prince’s” (194). The same holds true for her attitude concerning house elf rights. She detests the thought of being wrong—she is, after all, the star pupil at Hogwarts—and so tries to influence everyone to think the same way she does. Though her intentions to liberate the house elves are seemingly altruistic, she goes to the extreme and ultimately continues S.P.E.W. for her own, selfish purpose.

Readers can see Hermione’s ambition for personal gain even more so when she founds her second organization, Dumbledore’s Army. The idea occurs to her in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, when the students are being taught Defense Against the Dark Arts by the theory-driven Ministry worker Dolores Umbridge. Professor Umbridge refuses to teach them defensive magic in a practical manner, so Hermione takes it upon herself to make sure she is prepared for both the O.W.I. examination at the end of the school year and a confrontation with Voldemort, the latter of which she knows is an eventual problem she must face seeing as her best friend is his worst enemy. In simpler terms, Hermione is afraid; she is terrified of failure and of facing Voldemort underprepared. If she cannot defeat a

boggart in the shape of Professor McGonagall telling her she “failed everything,” she has no hope in a battle against the greatest dark wizard of all time (*Prisoner* 319). Her fear drives her to request something major of Harry: teach a secret defense organization, even after it has been banned by Educational Decree 24, which states that “No Student Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club may exist without the knowledge and approval of the High Inquisitor” (*Goblet* 351). Hermione is at least thoughtful enough to extend invitations to students who she believes would want to learn proper defensive magic...right? Actually, upon examining the situation, it seems as though she is simply trying to cover her tracks.

Although Hermione does not give the group its official name, she is the mastermind behind its birth. She knows Professor Umbridge is not a woman one wants to cross, so Hermione does her best to ensure that she will not take the blame if they get caught. First, she invites a fairly large group of students to join:

First came Neville with Dean and Lavender, who were closely followed by Parvati and Padma Patil with (Harry’s stomach did a back flip) Cho and one of her usually giggling girlfriends, then (on her own and looking so dreamy that she might have walked in by accident) Luna Lovegood; then Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet, and Angelina Johnson, Colin and Dennis Creevey, Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hannah Abbott, and a Hufflepuff girl with a long plait down her back whose name Harry did not know; three Ravenclaw boys he was pretty sure were called Anthony Goldstein, Michael Corner, and Terry Boot; Ginny, closely followed by a tall skinny blond boy with an upturned nose whom Harry recognized vaguely as being a member of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, and bringing up the rear, Fred and George Weasley with their friend Lee Jordan. (337-8)

By surrounding herself with twenty-five extra people, not counting Harry and Ron, Hermione makes it much more difficult for authorities to discern who the true culprit is. Moreover, she ought to realize with that keen brain of hers that Harry will be the number one suspect if they are found out, especially with Professor Umbridge, who has a strong dislike of Harry, around. Harry might be aware of this, for when Hermione begins the

meeting, she claims that “Harry here had the idea,” but then must admit that it was actually hers after “Harry had thrown her a sharp look” (339). Poor, blundering Hermione simply does not want to be caught, “or worse, expelled” (*Sorcerer* 162). Her attempt at incriminating her best friend fails, for he stops her in the act, but she has a backup plan; she makes sure her other peers will keep quiet, too. The fact that she puts a hex on the sign-up sheet is made worse by her doing so without letting her schoolmates know. The students agree to a contract, completely oblivious to what it entails: “‘I-I think everybody should write their name down, just so we know who was here. But I also think,’ she took a deep breath, ‘that we all ought to agree not to shout about what we’re doing. So if you sign, you’re agreeing not to tell Umbridge—or anybody else—what we’re up to’” (346). Hermione offers a warning, but it is basic and not entirely truthful, for she leaves out the bit that if any of them lets information slip, their faces will suffer for it. This is additional insurance; if someone gives away the secret, she’ll know exactly who it was. Hermione is willing to do what it takes to succeed, as long as it is not her neck being placed on the chopping block.

None of this is to make Hermione out to be a bad person. Ambition is a good thing to have, for without it, one would achieve nothing. However, there is such a thing as excess, and that can be detrimental. To be so stuck on achieving a goal, no matter the cost, can cause problems that were never intended or anticipated. Hermione proves that a strong desire for success can be both good and bad. Using ambition to help others is, obviously, a wonderful thing to do. Issues occur when one gets so wrapped up in what he or she is doing that the real goal is lost, replaced by one that is self-centered. The key, tricky as it might be, is to keep ambition from running wild.

Works Cited

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